

MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF USING MOBILE APPLICATION INSTAGRAM

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Abstract

This research presents a case study of using a mobile application Instagram in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) with advanced level students (N=50) in Kazan Federal University, Russia. The purpose of the research was to determine students' perception of the educational value of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) activities as well as to find out if the mobile application Instagram improves listening comprehension. During the spring semester the instructors uploaded three videos per week (N=34 videos) including some tasks and exercises in order to check the listening comprehension. The study reveals the efficiency of a mobile application Instagram as an online educational environment for learning EFL. The data comes from the quantitative and qualitative (open response questionnaire) research methodology and includes the results of pre- and post-tests assessing listening skills of the university students.

Keywords: mobile-assisted language learning, English as a foreign language, Instagram.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Mobile technologies in education

With the recent developments in mobile technology teachers and educators cannot help preventing mobile devices from classrooms. Mobile devices such as laptops, tablets, cellular phones, smart phones, mp3 players, digital cameras, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and e-readers are becoming very popular. Recent years have shown a persistent interest in using mobile technologies in secondary and higher education system (e.g. [1], [2], [3]). Devices "such as mobile phone and mp3 players have grown to such an extent over recent years and are gradually replacing personal computers in modern professional and social context" [4].

Achievements in technology totally changed the attitude to education that modern learners have, as a result mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is currently one of the most rapidly developing branches of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The term 'mobile learning' is a unique phenomenon that supposes the use of a wireless and digital device by learners at their time convenience for educational purposes. The term suggests interdependency of three elements: mobility of technology, mobility of learning and mobility of learners [5]. These new mobile devices and technologies have changed the nature of learning: "learning that used to be delivered 'just-in-case,' can now be delivered 'just-in-time,' 'just enough,' and 'just-for-me' [6]. According to Traxler, "mobile learning is not about 'mobile' or about 'learning' as previously understood, but part of a new mobile conception of society" [6]. This new 'mobile society' is encouraged a new kind of thinking by mobile devices and, therefore, a new kind of relationship between user and machine appears: "the responsive touchscreen interface seems to create a more personal, even intimate connection, becoming part of one's personal identity" [7].

The reasons of popularity of mobile technology in supporting language-learning according to the researchers are following: great usability of Web browser, high-resolution screen, more internal memory, fast Internet connectivity, user-friendliness, and fast access to plenty of apps in iTunes (more than 400,000) or Android. As technology plays an essential role in enhancing language learning, the effectiveness of any MALL tools depends on the knowledge and expertise of the language teacher. Successful integration of mobile technologies in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is connected with special technical skills and special training required from educators, however, using mobile technologies in the classroom by teachers "supports their confidence and competence" (e.g. [8], [9]).

Latest literature indicates the growing interest in MALL where researchers emphasize the need of

integrating mobile technology in teaching EFL especially in the system of higher education (see, for example, [10], [11], [5], [7], [8]). MALL provides foreign language teachers with online resources to improve students' language skills, initiate discussions and engage learners to collaborate in the target language beyond the classroom [12].

1.2 Mobile application Instagram as an educational environment

Mobile applications have taken a leading position in education. Popularity of mobile apps is facilitated by the rapid development of mobile technologies and mobile internet. For example, in Russia total number of smartphone users has increased to 20 million people on the Android platform and about 10 million on iOS platform (iPhone) [13]. Various educational applications have appeared, e.g. applications that focus on learning English such are Duolingo, Lingualeo, Busuu, Easy ten, as well as the popular application Google translator or dictionary Abby Linguo, which almost all smartphone users have.

This article describes the experience of integrating a mobile application of popular social networking platform Instagram as the educational environment for learning EFL. Latest CALL and MALL literature indicate lack of research from practitioners who describe learning and teaching EFL in social networking with the help of mobile applications [14]. There are some studies, however, in which the experience of using popular social networking is analysed. For example, [11] describes how EFL students of University of Science in Malaysia can benefit from using social networking service Facebook (FB) as an environment to learn English. The authors have identified the advantages of using FB as the following: the improvement of communicative and writing skills, the increase of motivation and interest in learning a language.

We believe that mobile learning with Instagram application meets the demands of university students. Firstly, Instagram is considered to be a rapidly developing platform for online social networking. If in December 2010 (3 months after Instagram launch) there were 1 million users, in June 2016 the number increased to 500 million active registered users (www.instagram.com). Secondly, Instagram is popular with young people, according to Pew Research Center the users aged 18-29 make the majority (37%) [15]. Thirdly, students being "digital natives" [16] are advanced users of mobile devices (they are accustomed to a variety of programs, operating systems like Android, iOS, Windows phone, Blackberry OS, Firefox OS and others) and can easily cope with the technical tasks of varying complexity. Finally, students make up the bulk of social networks, which means that they easily familiarize with the settings and various special functions. We consider that young people using mobile applications for educational purposes feels comfortable in an electronic environment, and all his attention is focused on the content, rather than on technical issues. Therefore, the popularity of the application might encourage university students to learn EFL.

Instagram social networking platform, as well as other online services such as VKontakte, Facebook, Google+, Twitter, YouTube and others, allows registered users to post personal content and to create social network with each other. Instagram was originally founded as a photo hosting, a free online application for uploading and sharing photos, as well as adding messages and uploading short (up to 30 second-long) videos. Instagram allows one to specify the location, mark the other users on the photos or videos, post comments below the photo or video, look for new people and observe the actions of the "guests". Some Instagram app disadvantages are mainly those associated with the functional features of any mobile device: small screen of a smartphone, inability to work without Internet access, absence of zoom function, absence of "pause" function for video, the impossibility save photos and video, as well as some researchers add "economic discrimination" [8].

The mobile application Instagram was selected as a tool for this study for the number of reasons.

- 1 The growing popularity of Instagram: currently it has 300 million daily and 500 million monthly active users [17], which can contribute to the attractiveness and effectiveness of Instagram as an educational platform.
- 2 Short videos (limitation to 30 seconds) are neither tiring nor time consuming, which is an important factor encouraging language learning.
- 3 The absence of "pause" option makes listening similar to authentic communication. The listener has to focus on the speaker's voice, making effort to understand everything from the first time in order to avoid play back. Thus, absence of "pause" function increases students' motivation.
- 4 Interactivity and bright interface of Instagram are extra benefits for a modern student.

This study sought to answer the following research questions.

- 1 Do the advanced level students consider mobile application Instagram as an effective means that can facilitate their English language learning?
- 2 Does mobile application Instagram improve students' listening comprehension? If yes, in what aspects?

2 METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants of the case study were second-year female students of Kazan Federal University (N=50) aged 18-20, who were attending their academic course of EFL, the level Advanced (C1 on CEFR scale). The students had their usual classes and for the purposes of the study were divided into 2 groups (Group A and Group B) twenty-five students each (N=25). The both groups were studying the English language according to the academic curriculum, developing all kinds of language skills including listening. In addition to the academic classes, Group A joined the experimental platform called «listen_it_in_english» (https://www.instagram.com/listen_it_in_english/) created by the teacher on the Instagram mobile app platform. Three times a week for four months (spring semester) students of Group A watched authentic videos (N=34) lasting up to 20 seconds each using their mobile phones (smartphones or iPhones) and completed listening comprehension exercises at a convenient time and in a convenient location. Though the students watched the videos and completed the tasks on their own, the teacher assessed listening comprehension and initiated discussions on the issues raised in the videos at the lesson.

2.2 The instrument

The survey began with the pre-test assessing the listening skills of the students of both groups. As an instrument of assessment the Cambridge English Language Assessment sample listening test of C1 CEFR level was used (<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/>). At the end of the spring semester the students of both groups were asked to do a posttest similar to the pretest, in order to compare and contrast the educational achievement of Group A and Group B and analyse the efficiency of using Instagram mobile app to improve listening skills. Doing each test (both pre-test and post-test) took approximately forty minutes.

Finally, the research group constructed a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) consisting of four close-ended and one open-ended question and asked the students of Group A to complete it. The first question inquired on the respondents' experience of using mobile applications for language learning purposes. The second and the third questions required the respondents to give details of the number of page views in order to answer comprehension questions. The fourth question inquired on the frequency of logging in to Instagram mobile application platform «listen_it_in_english» per week. The fifth question asked them to give feedback on learning the English language with Instagram. Filling out the questionnaire lasted approximately 5-10 minutes. The questionnaire was completed in person and returned immediately upon completion. The research team asked the participants' agreement to use the data for research purposes and to publish the results on an anonymous basis. The survey was conducted in the Russian language but then the questionnaire was translated into the English language for the research analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

The authors analyzed the data using mixed methods. The data received from the pre-test and post-test for Group A and Group B was collated. For us it was relevant to find out firstly, whether the results of the post-test would exceed the results of the pre-test, which could indicate to improvement of listening skills, and secondly, whether the results of Group A and Group B would differ in terms of academic achievement, indicating that the students of Group A benefited from working with Instagram. Qualitative method was applied to analyse the data (qualitative answer texts) received for question 5 of the questionnaire, and two main opinions revealing concerns of the respondents towards application Instagram as language learning environment were distinguished. For questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 quantitative method of data analysis was applied where only one option could be selected.

3 FINDING AND DISCUSSION

There are fifty (N=50) female students aged 18-20 who participated in this case study during the spring semester (from February till May 2016). These are students of language department in Kazan Federal University (Russia) learning EFL. The participants had two listening assessments: a pre-test during the first week and a post-test during the last week of the experiment. Results of the pre-test reveal language level between Upper-Intermediate and Advanced. The students were divided into two groups – Group A (N=25) and Group B (N=25). Students of Group B had their English language classes twice a week according to their academic curriculum. Students of Group A (an experimental group) in addition to their academic classes were asked on voluntary basis to subscribe the Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english» (https://www.instagram.com/listen_it_in_english/) and three times a week complete some comprehension tasks outside the class as home assignment. We uploaded authentic 20-second videos with different tasks (answering questions, filling gaps, matching synonyms and opposites etc.) and the teacher discussed answers during the lesson.

The questionnaires administered to Group A (N=25) demonstrated that learning languages in social networking is a new experience for students. Question 1 asks students if they had any previous experience of using any mobile applications for language learning purposes. The received data shows that 100% of the respondents have never used mobile applications for language learning purposes.

Fig. 1 displays the results of data collected from answers to questions 2 and 3. The questions inquired how many times the respondents played the video to do the comprehension tasks the **first** week and the **last** week of the experiment (questions 2 and 3 respectively).

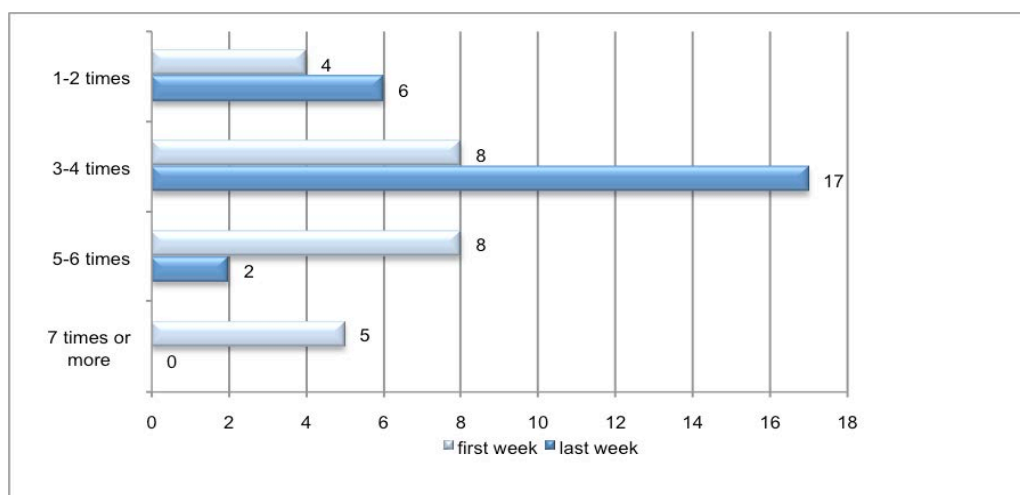


Figure 1. Q2 and Q3 How many times students of Group A played the video to answer the listening comprehension questions on Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english»

The videos and listening comprehension tasks were uploaded to Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english» three times a week. To analyse the students' participation in the experiment in question 4 we asked them to indicate the frequency of logging in to the platform per week. The results of data analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Q4: How many times students of Group A log in to Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english»

	Frequency (%)		
	1 time	2 times	3 times
Weekly	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	19 (76%)

For question 5 *How would you comment on your experience of learning EFL with mobile application Instagram?* we received 25 qualitative answer texts and identified two main concerns of the respondents on the issue of learning the English language with Instagram: a positive and a negative one. Content analysis showed that 12% (N=3) of the respondents expressed discontent with application Instagram as language learning environment. One student reasons that Instagram is less

convenient online environment for learning English: “I would prefer to watch a video on Youtube, where I can stop it any moment, rather than Instagram where there isn’t such function.” Another student is concerned with the abuse of social networking including Instagram. However, 88% (N=22) display a positive attitude towards learning EFL with mobile application Instagram. The students stress that quick and easy access to mobile Internet as well as bright interface of the application and interesting content make the learning English motivating. Moreover, many participants of this study mentioned the possibility to learn the English language with Instagram “anytime and anyplace”.

Table 2 demonstrates the pre- and post-test results evaluating and comparing the academic achievement of the students of Group A and Group B. As analysis showed, the students of Group A benefitted in terms of listening comprehension skills compared with the students of Group B. The findings indicate that the students who were learning English with Instagram demonstrated better results in completing Part 1 of the listening comprehension test, which was aimed to assess language abilities to understand topics, opinions and specific information (mean score increased up to 0.9 points). On the whole, students of Group A improved listening skills from total mean score 18.9 to 21.3 points (2.4 points) while the students of Group B from 19.6 to 20.3 points (0.7 points).

Table 2. Listening comprehension: pre- and post-tests results

Listen parts	Abilities assessed ¹	Task	Points (max)	Group A (N=25)		Group B (N=25)	
				Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
1	Understanding topics, opinions and specific information	Multiple choice	6	3.3	4.2	3.5	3.7
2	Understanding specific information, stated opinion	Sentence completion	8	5.5	5.9	5.7	5.8
3	Understanding attitude, opinion, speaker purpose, function and detail	Multiple choice	6	2.7	3.4	2.7	3
4	Understanding gist, attitude, opinion, main points and context	Multiple matching	10	7.4	7.8	7.7	7.8
Total			30	18.9	21.3	19.6	20.3

As can be seen from Table 2, learning English with mobile application Instagram improves students’ listening comprehension skills. The results prove attest to the applicability of mobile application Instagram as an online environment that could facilitate English language learning.

4 CONCLUSION

The current study revealed that mobile application Instagram can serve as an effective means of learning EFL by the advanced level students. Mobile application Instagram improved students’ listening comprehension skills, in particular, the ability to understand opinions and specific information in authentic speech. Instagram facilitates listening comprehension on condition that students fully participate and are involved in self-study. Students are motivated by appealing Instagram interface and fast access to mobile Internet. Moreover, many participants of this study mentioned the possibility to learn the English language with Instagram “anytime and anyplace” [14].

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire and test results, mobile application Instagram could be utilized as an online educational environment to support and enhance learning EFL. Pre- and post-test analysis revealed academic achievement in listening comprehension of students of Kazan Federal University.

¹ Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE): Exam format: Listening paper
(<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/advanced/exam-format/>)

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire for students of Kazan Federal University

1. Have you ever used any mobile applications for language learning purposes before?
2. How many times did you play the video to answer the listening comprehension questions on Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english»? [First week of experiment]
 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times 7 times and more
3. How many times did you play the video to answer the listening comprehension questions on Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english»? [Last week of experiment]
 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times 7 times and more
4. How many times did you log in to Instagram platform «listen_it_in_english» per week?
 1 time 2 times 3 times
5. How would you comment on your experience of learning EFL with mobile application Instagram?